

MENNONITE HISTORICAL BULLETIN

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No. 1

Brief Biography of M. S. Steiner

John S. Umble

Menno S. Steiner, born near Cranberry, Ohio, on April 30, 1866, was descended from at least five generations of Mennonite ministers. His father was Christian Peter Steiner of Swiss Mennonite descent. His mother was Barbara Thut, the daughter of Bishop John Thut, founder of the Mennonite congregation at Riley Creek, later known as the Zion congregation, west of Bluffton, Ohio.

His first years of education were spent in a little rural school, four miles west of Bluffton. Although education was unpopular in a large section of the Mennonite Church at that time, and although his father no doubt could have used him at home, the family made it possible for Menno to attend high school at Bluffton. He completed the high school course in 1887 and then taught school for two years, 1887-88 and 1888-89.

In 1885 he was converted under the preaching of Evangelist J. S. Coffman and united with the Riley Creek Church, later called Zion, west of Bluffton. He was early impressed to do Christian work and felt a special call to the ministry. One of the most serious disappointments of his early life was his failure to be chosen by the lot when his congregation chose a minister during the time that he was teaching. Soon after this event and near the close of Menno's second term of school, John F. Funk of the Mennonite Publishing Company at Elkhart, Indiana, visited the Steiner home. He persuaded Menno to work for the Mennonite Publishing Company during the summer vacation selling family Bibles and other books, taking subscriptions for the publications of the company, and making collections. He spent the summers of 1889-90 at this work, then gave up his plans to continue teaching during the winter of 1890-91 and continued his connection with the Publishing Company until the fall of 1891, by which time he had earned enough money to attend Oberlin College at Oberlin, Ohio, in direct preparation for Christian work.

The work with the Publishing Company gave him an unusual opportunity for becoming acquainted with Sunday-school workers and church leaders in all the leading Mennonite and Amish Mennonite communities in the United States and Canada. Sometimes for months he would travel from place to place visiting Sunday



M. S. STEINER, 1866-1911
An early Mennonite student at Ohio
Normal University, Ada, Ohio

schools, meeting workers, studying local church history, and writing the history of many of the Amish and Amish Mennonite congregations. These contacts proved of great value to him during the next few years. He probably was acquainted with more Sunday-school workers and ministers than even J. S. Coffman. His study of the history of the various congregations led him to see that many of the difficulties were accidental, were due to slightly differing customs brought from Europe to America by groups that had emigrated from the old country at various times and from different communities.

His being of Swiss Mennonite parentage left him without prejudice toward either Mennonites or Amish Mennonites and he was able to work with both groups in a way that even J. S. Coffman was unable to do. Because he was not ordained, he was not marked either as Mennonite or as Amish Mennonite. This again proved a decided advantage. If he had been ordained a minister in his younger years and had been tied down to pastoral duties in his home congregation, it is doubtful whether he could have done his later work as well as he did. In the fall of 1891, as already mentioned, he entered Oberlin College. Even before this time he had done considerable writing but his work was that of an amateur, his style at

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Pioneer Mennonite Students at Ada, Ohio

Sylvanus Yoder

It was in the spring of 1892 that I undertook the ordeal of a teachers' examination to secure a teacher's certificate to teach in the grade schools of Wayne County, Ohio. It was during this session that the professor in charge announced the passage of a bill by the legislative assembly providing for an examination of grade pupils (pupils were not graded, for this reason I refrain from the term later used, eighth grade), in accordance with which those who passed might enter the high school at the public expense of the township. Previous to this all rural pupils were permitted to attend high school only at their own expense.

What were you doing at a teachers' examination at such an early age, just as you were leaving grade school? Seems I can at once sense such a question from those who read this. My reply is that boyish ambitions nurtured perhaps by instincts of self-conceit prompted this venture. However ridiculous this venture may seem, I at least partly justified it on the ground that an occasional grade pupil did pass the teachers' examination successfully. However, I did not pass the examination.

My failure at the teachers' examination however inspired me with a more determined effort along educational lines. I decided at once to take the grade pupils' examination at the appointed date, in which I successfully passed the first examinations which the state provided for this purpose and I participated in a simple commencement program held in Wooster on that occasion. The date of the commencement was June 4, 1892. The motto written in Latin upon my diploma was "Non quod sed quid." The diploma was signed by Eversole Wright, and Berg. A cousin of mine, Amanda Stoltzfus, from near Knoxville, Tennessee, interpreted the Latin inscription for me.

My father was a successful farmer of Wayne County. He spent his entire life on the farm on which he was born except nine years which were spent in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Although he possessed many characteristics of a student, he always regarded higher education in somewhat of a passive manner. He was not ignorant of the laws of nature and in a remarkable degree he understood the anat-

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QUESTION BOX

What explanation is there for the large class of converts at Oak Grove in 1890?

—J. C. W.

The reason for this large class of converts in the spring of 1890 may perhaps best be answered by the following illustration:

In a certain family of seven children where father and stepmother and the oldest daughter were members of the church the father announced at the breakfast table that today was the semiannual council or "Ordnung" service at the church and as loyal members he expected all of the family who were members of the church to attend. The daughter, whom I shall designate as Sarah, unhesitatingly replied that she did not want to attend the service. Oh yes, said father, it is proper and important that you should attend this meeting. As a member of the church you should know what the requirements are and what the church expects of you. Besides, you should be made to know the consequences of being a disobedient member. In the face of all this plea for attendance Sarah still pleaded her feelings of reluctance but finally yielded.

The reason for Sarah's reluctant attendance at this service may perhaps be explained as follows: It had been only a few years before that her mother upon her death bed had charged her to a large extent with the responsibility for the family. Sarah had since the death of her mother accepted Christ and sealed her vow in baptism in the stream just down the hill east of the church. To her this reluctance was not a feeling of disloyalty to Christ or the cause of righteousness. If she would have been asked to go upon an errand of mercy or engage in some spiritual song service, she would have heartily consented, but the thought of attending a service which seemed to be a formal ritualistic observance of prescribed customs was to her an obnoxious ceremony. Why should any one be called upon the carpet who had in no way violated the teachings of Divine Writ?

Sarah was no outstanding character. She made no pretense of leadership but her ideas were duplicated in many of the young people of the community who were yet outside the fold of Christ. These young people were not a rebellious group. Many of them were convicted of sin and longed for a life of communion with God and a fellowship with His people some of whom even left the church of their parents and united with churches of other denominations. God's Spirit strove with them. The procrastination was due not only to the common procedure of the one convicted but also to the formal ritualistic attitude of the members of the church. This formalism generally was championed by men of questionable conduct, who were often addicted to the use of tobacco.

Another reason for this procrastination of which I hesitate to write was the pitiful condition of the church at this time.

Due perhaps largely to differences of opinion with regard to formal regulations and dissension in the ministry the congregation was on the verge of a schism which it but narrowly escaped. A thorough purging and a settling of things in an orderly manner were of urgent necessity. It was this that the church faced. The parents saw it to be imperative. The ministry was finally awakened to the fact. The prayers of the faithful remnant prevailed and the church was spared from the awful tragedy and peace was restored.

Early in the year a series of evangelistic services was held in the old Oak Grove Church with D. J. Johns as evangelist. His appeal to peace and love and devotion to God and the cause of righteousness brought about the desired result. The sand was removed from the worn bearings and the lubrication of divine love was applied. Our hearts which for a number of years rebelled against the convictions of God's Holy Spirit yielded.

—Sylvanus Yoder.

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times being ungrammatical and his rhetoric faulty. Even before the close of his first year at Oberlin, his style had improved and matured. *The Herald of Truth* published many of his articles as leaders. He wrote on various subjects but especially on church unity, missions, church institutions, Sunday-school work, temperance, and church problems generally.

In 1892 he had a large part in the promotion of the first general Mennonite Sunday School Conference in the United States and Canada. Menno Steiner and J. S. Coffman had laid the foundation for this Sunday-school conference in their visitation work throughout the church, Coffman as evangelist and Steiner as agent for the Mennonite Publishing Company. From the first he was a leading figure in the work of the annual Sunday-school conferences. He was elected moderator of the first conference held at Clinton Frame Church near Goshen, Indiana. In 1893 at the second general Sunday School Conference, held at Steiner's home congregation near Bluffton, Ohio, steps were taken to organize the first Mennonite city mission. Steiner was appointed as its first superintendent. Agitation at the third Sunday School Conference (1894) resulted in the founding of the *Young People's Paper* and Steiner became its first editor.

In March 1893, Steiner was chosen for the ministry by vote of the congregation at Elkhart, Indiana, and was ordained by Bishop John F. Funk. From this time forward, Steiner did considerable evangelistic work especially among the small struggling congregations in his native state. In much of his work he took the attitude of the outspoken reformer. His direct, frank, open methods brought him into conflict with some of the church leaders at this time. He recognized his weakness

and although he devoted some time and energy to overcoming it, he seems eventually to have resigned himself to it. On more than one occasion he said, "The Lord made some people a smoothing plane. He created me a ripsaw."

But he had many warm friends and was able to inspire the confidence of those who had funds to give to the work of the church. Through the assistance of Mrs. Louisa Snavely of Bluffton, he was able to bring about the purchase of the property now held by the Orphans' Home at West Liberty, Ohio. He was greatly interested in using both the Sunday school and the Mission work of the church as a means of bringing together the Mennonite and Amish Mennonite branches of the church. His influence coupled with that of other leaders like J. S. Coffman and John F. Funk finally resulted in the organization of the Mennonite General Conference in 1898.

In 1899 he was one of the leading organizers of the Mennonite Board of Charitable Homes and was elected president of the corporation. In 1903 the charter was amended so as to include missions, Steiner still retaining his place as president. He continued his service as president until 1906 when the M. B. C. H. and Missions was merged with the Mennonite Evangelizing and Benevolent Board under the name of the Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities. He was elected the first president of the new Board and occupied that position until the time of his death.

In 1894 Menno Steiner was married to Clara Daisy Eby of Bluffton, Ohio. Three daughters and two sons were born to this union. Although he handled considerable sums of money in the promotion of the charitable and missionary interests of the church, he and his family seldom had more than the bare necessities. On more than one occasion when he was absent on evangelistic tours or engaged in some activity in connection with missionary or charitable enterprises of the church, his family was dependent on the garden, the cow, and the little flock of chickens for their subsistence.

During the last few years of his life, he was an acute sufferer from Bright's Disease and spent several periods in various hospitals seeking to recover his health but whenever he had regained a bit of strength, he at once spent it in continuing his labors for the church. He succumbed to the disease at the Bluffton Sanitarium March 12, 1911, passing away in the prime of life at the early age of 45.

Therefore we beg and admonish thee as a brother, by the name, the power, the word, the spirit, and the salvation, which has come to all Christians through Jesus Christ our Master and Saviour, that thou wilt take earnest heed to preach only the divine word without fear, to set up and guard only divine institutions, to esteem as good and right only what may be found in pure and clear Scripture, to reject, hate, and curse all devices, words, customs, and opinions of men, including thine own.

—Conrad Grebel, 1524.

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NEWS & NOTES

For a longer article on M. S. Steiner the reader is directed to John Umble's book, *Mennonite Pioneers*, published in 1940, pages 71-95. This book was reviewed in the BULLETIN for October, 1940.

On the first page of the April, 1941, BULLETIN there appeared a photograph of the late Lancaster Conference bishop, Jacob N. Brubacher (1838-1913). It will be seen upon close inspection that Bishop Brubacher was wearing dark glasses at the time as was his custom. It is said that he wore such glasses even while preaching. Can any reader give the reason for his doing this?

For about twelve years Silas Hertzler of Goshen, Indiana, has annually compiled attendance statistics from all Mennonite schools and colleges. Every year these statistics have been published in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*. The latest such report appeared in the *Review* for October, 1941. Thirteen tables give in summary form many interesting data from the fourteen institutions which are reported. One table has comparative statistics showing attendance trends in Mennonite schools over the past twelve years. The highest total attendance at these schools was in 1936 when 3136 students were enrolled. Since then the total attendance has fallen off a little every year. However, the enrollment of students on the college level has never been higher than it was last year, the decrease being due to many less students on the high school or academy level. Many other interesting facts can be gleaned from the tables in these articles.

"The Mennonites of Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania," by Edward Yoder, appeared in two installments in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* in 1941. The congregation at Scottsdale has undertaken to reprint the article as a history of its one hundred and fifty years in the form of a sixty-four page monograph, adding a local map, several illustrations, and a few other features.

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An Oak Grove Baptismal Class

On Saturday, May 24, 1890, forty-two converts were baptized by bishops John K. Yoder (1824-1906) and D. J. Johns (1850-) and received into the fellowship of the Oak Grove Amish Mennonite Church. A list of those in the baptismal class was preserved by one of the class, Katie Gerig Smucker, and was made available for publication by I. W. Royer, well-known Mennonite minister of Orrville, Ohio, another member of the class. The second person in the list, Albert Hartzler, later served the Oak Grove congregation as deacon. The following were baptized

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omy of the human body and the circulation of the blood. He was born in a log cabin on the farm known as the Wooster Summit Farm in January, 1840, and being in constant contact with pioneer life in his early years the thoughts of a higher education were rather foreign to him. He was by no means hostile to, but rather was open minded toward helpful suggestions along agricultural lines. Geometrical problems often occupied his mind and the validity of a statement was to him of great importance. Accuracy was another of his characteristics.

In the year 1868, immediately following the Civil War, a school of the type of an academy was launched in our home town, Smithville, just north of our home. This school later was more thoroughly organized and managed by the Eberleys and developed into what was at that time known as an academy and normal school. The stories of pranks such as are common among students supplied material for gossip and ridicule in which the sons of these primitive farmers often denounced this institution of higher learning.

It was at such a time, when farmers had not yet given up all primitive ideas in methods of farming and doing business, that I received my grade diploma. I must confess that it was an innovation of the established custom among both Amish and Mennonite farmers, and when I first asked permission of my father to attend the academy at Smithville the following year I was at once refused. However, during the summer months I noticed that father's attitude toward a higher education was softening. One of the factors in this change was the visit of Professor C. F. English, a Methodist minister who was then in charge of the school. He came to our home as a solicitor for students for the following year. When the school opened, I had father's consent to be there, and a happier boy than I was hard to find when with Simon Zook, a brother of Lina Ressler, I loitered just outside the door of the old academy awaiting the call to the first chapel service on a November morning in 1892. My Mennonite schoolmates at Smithville were E. J. Zook, Simon Zook, Joseph Plank; two boys from the Church of the Brethren, Eli Heestand and

in the 1890 class: Elmer King, Albert Hartzler, Samuel Ziegler, John B. Yoder, George Hooley, Ben Otto, Elmer Smucker, Isaiah W. Royer, John Gerig, Joseph Plank, Chauncey King, Peter Conrad, Jacob Musser, Christ Kabil, Neri Blough, Sylvanus Yoder, Noah Smucker, John S. Yoder, Simon Smucker, Jacob Leichty, John Heiks, Christ Kropf, Daniel Martin, David Speicher, Joseph Kauffman, Levi Schrock, Emma Smucker, Mary King, Barbara Smucker, Ellen Yoder, Amanda Ziegler, Alice Wenger, Amanda Burkholder, Mary Zook, Mary Detweiler, Katie Hiltz, Katie Gerig, Katie Kurtz, Sadie Plank, Lydia Plank, Anna Gingerich, Lydia Musser.

William Gerber, and also from the Brethren in Christ (River Brethren) a young man, John Longenecker, and his sister.

Much as I enjoyed the school life at Smithville, my mind was constantly drawn to the school at Ada, Ohio (Ohio Normal University). I was told glowing stories of this famous school of approximately 1500 students. A former teacher, who was successful in arousing in me a desire for educational endeavor, had employed much of the training he had acquired at Ada in his successful teaching. E. J. Zook who had successfully passed the teachers' examination immediately after leaving the grades was an enthusiastic admirer of Ada. He spoke of the school as a place where the very atmosphere was permeated with enthusiastic ambition and even C. K. Hostetler, who for a short time served as superintendent of the Oak Grove Sunday School and later was Editor of the *Young People's Paper* at Elkhart and Business Manager of Goshen College, referred to Ada from the pulpit (as Sunday-school superintendent) in the old Oak Grove Church. I do not justify my ambitious cravings but I curiously ask, "Did you ever step in the way of an enthusiastic youth?" I speak as one of experience both as a son and as a father. It may be necessary at times to curb an ambitious person, but woe unto that father or teacher who fails to realize the enormity of this undertaking and thus fails in the endeavor. My mind was bent on going to school at Ada, Ohio.

Why was it that so many of our Mennonite young men were drawn to this institution? I have already set forth that which to a large extent drew me to the school at Ada, but there were a number of other reasons. The school did not cater to the whims and airs of popular society. Most of its students were from rural communities. The President, H. S. Lehr, himself was reared on a farm near Madisonburg just north of Wooster, Ohio. So far as farm life and rural dispositions were concerned a Mennonite boy could easily adapt himself to conditions at Ada. The school was thorough in its work and maintained a splendid discipline among its students. The successful achievements of students who had gone out from the institution were in evidence far and wide, not only as teachers but as other professionals such as surveyors, civil engineers, and lawyers. The school was surrounded by Mennonite localities. To the south were the churches of the vicinity of West Liberty, to the west were the churches of Elida, to the northwest were the churches of Bluffton, to the northeast was the congregation at New Stark, and farther east were the churches of eastern Ohio. A daily chapel service was a part of the program and on various occasions Bible study classes were organized among the students. Students were urged to attend church services. The last reason I have will be given in somewhat of an undertone, the Mennonite Church, though almost 400 years old, had not yet launched a program of higher education (in America). (To be continued in June issue)

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

The Story of the Mennonites. By C. Henry Smith. Published by Mennomite Book Concern, Berne, Indiana. 1941. 823 pages. Price \$2.50.

This volume on Mennomite history appeared less than a year ago. It is therefore up-to-date. It is in fact a revision and enlargement of the earlier book entitled *The Mennomites* by the same author. Nearly two thirds of this volume is taken up with the story of the Mennomites in Europe, their origins and their history through more than four centuries, with full information on their experiences since the World War, notably in Russia. The last 290 pages present the story of the Mennomites in the Americas.

The author in this book has made full use of the newer materials pertaining to the origins of the Anabaptists and Swiss Brethren, which have been brought to the light by John Horsch and other historians in recent decades. He has also included reliable data on the latest movements and migrations of Mennomites. The book is therefore a comprehensive work which will fill a real need for the general reader, whether he happens to be inside or outside the Mennomite ranks.

It was the aim of the author to write the history or tell the story of the Mennomites taken as a whole, giving recognition to all the branches and wings of the body that goes by that name. The story of each group is given in the light of the circumstances that gave rise to its existence and the developments that have taken place in the course of time. For the most part the story is objectively written and a fair perspective is maintained. Not all readers will agree, perhaps, that the author has succeeded so well in being objective in evaluating the recent history of the Mennomites in America. Some will detect a bias toward the General Conference of the Mennomites of North America, the branch with which the author is affiliated. It is of course impossible for any of us to view without bias the historical developments of our own time or to interpret their real significance, for the reason that we are too close to the events themselves to see them in perspective.

As might be expected in a book of this length and scope, some few errors of fact could be pointed out, if there were time and space to do so. On the whole it is reliable. Written in a readable and interesting style, it is truly an informational story of the Mennomites. A few illustrations are included in the book, occasionally a footnote is found, no bibliography, and a very brief index. The author is professor of history at Bluffton College, Bluffton, Ohio. He is a foremost authority on the history of the Mennomites in America, and has published perhaps a half dozen books in this field during the past thirty-five years.—Edward Yoder.

Mennomite Historical Association

This organization was formed about two years ago, being brought into existence by the Historical Committee of Mennomite General Conference. The purpose of the organization is to create and stimulate more interest in the history of the Mennomite Church among the members of the church. In nearly every Mennomite community there are one or more persons who are curious about the early history of the church and of their own congregation. Perhaps they have collected some early records themselves, or would like to get ideas on how to go about to gather historical information which in time would perhaps be lost altogether. Others like to read about the historical studies others have made. All such persons should become members of this new church-wide Mennomite Historical Association. Through belonging to this Association they will be kept in touch with others who are similarly interested in other communities, and they will find out what work is being done in recording and preserving the history of the church.

In order to unite the members of the Mennomite Historical Association and keep them in touch with the work that is being done along historical lines, the Historical Committee of our General Conference publishes the MENNOMITE HISTORICAL BULLETIN which you have in your hands. In it are published brief and pointed historical articles, short biographies of earlier church leaders, reports on books and pamphlets that deal with Mennomite history, as well as news notes on what the Historical Committee and others are doing in studying the history of the church and of the various settlements and congregations.

Historical Committee Meets

The members of the Historical Committee of Mennomite General Conference are the directors of the Mennomite Historical Association mentioned above. This committee met on December 23, 1941, to transact its regular business. All the members were present at this meeting, excepting Bro. J. C. Clemens. A full day was spent in work by the committee. Some of the time was devoted to discussion and plans for the Mennomite Historical Association and its work during the coming two years.

Among the decisions made by the Committee at this meeting were the following: (1) The BULLETIN shall now be published four times a year instead of twice a year as heretofore, beginning with the present issue. (2) the editors for the coming two years shall be John C. Wenger and Edward Yoder, the other members of the Historical Committee being associate editors. (3) There shall be two types of membership in the Mennomite Historical Association; the regular membership as

heretofore shall be one dollar a year, and for those who wish to contribute more largely to the historical work of the Association there shall be available a sustaining membership at five dollars a year.

Except for the doubling of the number of issues for a year, the BULLETIN will continue with the same size and form which it has had heretofore. Edward Yoder, who will share the direct editorial work with John C. Wenger, has served as office editor of the Bulletin at Scottdale from its beginning.

Send Your Dues for 1942 Now

All members of the Mennomite Historical Association will receive free all four numbers of the BULLETIN upon the payment of either the small regular membership fee of one dollar or the sustaining membership fee of five dollars per year. Since the number of issues is now doubled, more members are needed for the Association. Old members who have not yet sent in their membership dues for 1942 should do so at once. Others are invited to join the Historical Association now. Please send your name and address together with the membership fee to the secretary, Harold S. Bender, Goshen, Indiana, or to Edward Yoder, treasurer, Scottdale, Pa.

NEWS AND NOTES

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New family histories and genealogies continue to appear in print from time to time. Among histories of families from Mennomite ancestors the following are some that have come out in recent years:

Peter Reist of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and Some of His Descendants (1933), by Henry G. Reist, Schenectady, N. Y., with 118 pages, has besides the genealogy some valuable historical documents.

A History of the Descendants of Abraham Brenneman (1744-1815), by Charles Brenneman, Elida, Ohio. The book is a complete genealogical register of this Brenneman's descendants, with brief biographies of prominent characters among them; 556 pages.

Holdeman Descendants, (1937) by Edwin L. Weaver, containing the genealogical and biographical record of the descendants of Christian Holdeman (1788-1846). There are 575 pages, with several indices.

John Horst Family, a short sketch of John Horst's (1801-1875) ancestry and record of his lineage, published by Hettie K. (Horst) Hess and Lydia Ruth Hess. No addresses are given with the families; there is no index.

A Genealogy and History of the Kauffman-Coffman Families of North America, 1584-1937, by Charles Fahs Kauffman, 826 Florida Avenue, York, Pa. There are 775 pages of genealogical and biographical data.

